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YOUR CONGREGATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Your  
Congregational  
Archives

Published by the AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

*on the Cincinnati campus of the  
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion*

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## I. WHY A CONGREGATIONAL ARCHIVES?

A JEWISH COMMUNITY HAS EXISTED IN America for more than three centuries. In the year 1654 a handful of Jews—some twenty-three souls in all—disembarked at New Amsterdam, the tiny Dutch settlement at the mouth of the Hudson River, and established the first Jewish community in what is now the United States. By the year 1960, the American Jewish community had grown into a group of nearly 5,500,000. How this growth was accomplished, what it meant to those who were involved in it and to the land which fostered it, the enormous importance it came to possess for the Jewish communities of the world—this is surely one of the most remarkable and significant stories both in American and in Jewish history. It is a story that dedicated and disciplined scholars are attempting to tell today and that generations of scholars will attempt to tell even more fully in the future. For those who lack an understanding of the American Jewish experience will, in the final analysis, lack an understanding of the American dream and the Jewish heritage.

There are many difficulties. Scholars need more than dedication and discipline. They need documentary sources—the raw material of history—if their labors are to prove of enduring worth. When such sources are scarce—and this is often the case—researchers find themselves greatly handicapped.

### *Synagogue Records An Important Source*

Where is this raw material to be found, and how is it to be made available to historians capable of employing it to recapture the living story of American Jewry? It may be safely stated that



no agency within the American Jewish community is in a better position to supply a satisfactory answer to this all-important question than the American synagogue. So much of American Jewish life has been, and still is, reflected in the synagogue, the basic institution of American Jewry, that synagogal records constitute one of the most important sources the scholar can hope to secure. For that reason, the American Jewish Archives, a center for historical research on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, has undertaken to prepare this brochure. The American Jewish Archives hopes that this pamphlet will encourage American congregations to organize their own individual archives, if they have not already done so, and that it will guide them in embarking on this important enterprise.

There is no doubt at all that scholars at work in the field today, not to mention future historians of the American scene, will be greatly indebted to congregations which preserve their records, maintain them in an archives, and make them available for historical research. American Jews will certainly not be the only ones to benefit from the successful execution of such a design; Americans of all backgrounds and persuasions will profit from the light that will inevitably be cast on the complexities and involvements of the American saga.

## II. HOW TO ORGANIZE A CONGREGATIONAL ARCHIVES

Given a reasonable measure of patience and a reasonable regard for planning, the over-all organization of a congregational archives is a fairly simple matter. It requires a certain amount of meticulousity and a respect for detail, but it does not demand a great deal of prior training. Experience, in this as in so many other matters, is ordinarily a more than adequate teacher, and the congregation which sets out to establish its own archives will discover that, the



further it penetrates into the enterprise, the more satisfactory the results will be.

### *Archives Should Be Housed on the Congregation's Premises*

There are some important requirements that a congregation should make every effort to meet. In the first place, the archives should be under the congregation's own auspices and should be housed on the premises of the congregation itself. A congregational archives should not be under the auspices of, or housed in the home of, an officer or other member of the congregation, unless it is simply not feasible to do otherwise—as, for instance, in the case of a new congregation which is as yet in no position to maintain a synagogue building of its own. In this latter case, the archives should be transferred to the synagogue structure as soon as one is acquired.

In a smaller congregation, the archives should be maintained by the rabbi's secretary; in a larger congregation, by the executive secretary. Otherwise, if at all possible, it should be administered by a person with some executive skill including library and statistical experience. At the very least, where this is not possible, the person charged with the administration of the archives should be someone whose conscientiousness, discretion, and patience are beyond question. In many instances, it may be possible to obtain guidance from a local community-wide agency like the Jewish Welfare Fund, or the Jewish Community Relations Committee. In any event, the final responsibility for the archives should rest with the secretary of the congregation and with the board of trustees.

### *Fireproof Files Essential*

All the holdings of the archives should be stored in "fireproof"—*not* merely "fire resistant"—files or filing cabinets. These should be kept under lock and key and should not be made available

except under the supervision of the person charged with the administration of the archives. Access to the archives should be denied anyone without proper credentials.

A report, published either in mimeographed form or as part of the congregational bulletin, should be issued at least annually, and if possible semiannually, listing in some detail the holdings and acquisitions of the archives. This report should be made available to local and national historical societies, libraries, universities, and archival organizations, both Jewish and general. Among the national Jewish organizations which should be informed of the congregation's archival holdings are the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati 20, Ohio; the American Jewish Historical Society, 150 Fifth Avenue, New York 11, N. Y.; the American Jewish History Center, 3080 Broadway, New York 27, N. Y.; and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1048 Fifth Avenue, New York 28, N. Y.

### *Alphabetical Card-File*

Finally, an alphabetically arranged card-file of the holdings of the congregational archives should be initiated and carefully maintained. The cards should be 3" x 5" or 5½" x 8".

## III. WHAT SHOULD A CONGREGATIONAL ARCHIVES COLLECT?

This is not the easiest of questions to answer, since the conditions of congregational life vary so much from one Jewish community to another. Where a congregation is located in a relatively sizable community and is only one of a complex of Jewish organizations and societies, its field of collecting material will necessarily be limited. Where, however, a congregation is the only, or the major, Jewish institution in a community, its field will be much more extensive. Still, there are certain aspects of Jewish

community life to which any congregational archives must give some thought.

### *Preservation of Congregational Records*

All minutes of board and congregational meetings should be preserved with particular care.\* This is true also for related congregational records such as the minutes of important committees. Membership applications, members' permanent family records (indicating births, marriages, etc.), and cemetery records constitute important sources and should be most diligently preserved.

Minutes and records relating to important congregational activities such as the religious school, the sisterhood, the brotherhood, the youth group, and the young adults' and young marrieds' groups should all be preserved.

### *Organizations and Publications*

Where Jewish community organizations, such as fraternal lodges (the B'nai B'rith, for instance), women's associations (Hadassah, for example), welfare organizations, and the like, are intimately connected with the congregation—as is often the case in smaller, one-congregation Jewish communities—these groups should be encouraged to deposit their minutes and other records in the congregational archives.

Most congregations periodically issue bulletins, newsletters, or comparable items, and some issue yearbooks. As complete a col-

\*Information about the proper keeping of congregational minutes and records, suggestions about forms to be used for membership and other records, and examples of methods employed in leading congregations may be obtained from the National Association of Temple Administrators, care of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 838 Fifth Avenue, New York 21, N. Y., or from the executive secretary of any large congregation.

Mr. Irving I. Katz, the able executive secretary of Congregation Beth El in Detroit, Michigan, has developed a particularly fine system of forms for various congregational records.



lection as possible of past bulletins, newsletters, and yearbooks should be assembled for deposit in the congregational archives, and this collection should be systematically augmented with copies of all future congregational publications.

Any other publications of the congregation or of any of its subsidiaries (the religious school, youth group, etc.) should be carefully filed.

"Nearprint" material—that is, brochures, pamphlets, news releases, special programs, even ephemeral items like the menus of congregational luncheons or dinners, as well as newspaper clippings—should form an important part of the congregational archives. The fact that an item is ephemeral does not mean that it lacks historical interest. All local newspapers, both Jewish and general, should be scanned daily, if possible, and all items relating to the life of the congregation or any of its members should be clipped, carefully marked as to the name and date of the newspaper, and filed as part of the "nearprint" collection. Moreover, a complete run of any local Jewish newspaper should be preserved at the congregational archives.

### *Cemeteries and Personalia*

A special file should be set up to indicate the location of every tombstone or grave marker in the congregational cemetery as well as any tombstones or grave markers of members of the congregation in other cemeteries.

Personalia relating to individuals and families associated with the congregation should be carefully preserved. People associated with the congregation should be urged and encouraged to deposit in its archives personal correspondence, diaries, memoirs, genealogical records, passports, naturalization certificates, birth and marriage records, apprenticeship papers, peddlers' licenses, records of military service, old wills, deeds, and similar documents. Items of this sort are very frequently invaluable research materials.

The congregational archives should also retain transcripts of

interviews with prominent individuals, older settlers, and descendants of "pioneer" families.

Tape recordings of congregational events, personal interviews, and the like, as well as motion pictures of congregational events or important events in the lives of members of the congregation, should be preserved.

Finally—and this applies particularly to smaller, one-congregation communities—copies of Jewish data recorded on tombstones in local cemeteries, on plaques in the synagogue and public institutions like the public library, on statues, etc., should be filed in the congregational archives.

### *Congregational History Committees*

In short, the congregational archives should be devoted to collecting material which reflects the life of the congregation and the activities and concerns of its members and their families. No congregation is too small or too remote to possess historical importance. In this connection, it is suggested that the congregation establish a committee on history—or *pinkas* committee, as it is sometimes called—to compile annually a brief sketch of "highlights" of the congregational year. Such an annual sketch could be distributed to the members of the congregation and other interested parties and institutions in mimeographed form, perhaps as a supplement to any bulletin that the congregation may issue. In addition, the *pinkas* committee should prepare and distribute a carefully written history of the congregation every five years.

## IV. HOW TO FILE ACQUISITIONS

This is, of course, a task which demands diligent and patient attention to detail.

In the first place, each acquisition, however major or minor it may appear, should be carefully entered in an "accession book"—

a note-book, or ledger, set aside for that purpose. Each entry should note the date on which the material was received and the name of the donor from whom it was acquired.

A catalogue card—3" x 5" or 5½" x 8"—should be prepared for each acquisition, citing the date on which it came into the archives' possession, the name of the item's donor, and any special conditions attaching to the gift. At the top, the card should contain a brief description of the material.

Care should be taken with regard to the proper arrangement of material acquired by the congregational archives. Materials relating to individuals and families associated with the congregation should be filed biographically—that is, separate biographical files for each individual or each family may be set up to house this material, filed alphabetically.

### *Topical Files for Congregational Events*

Events on the congregational scene, minutes of congregational meetings, board meetings, committee meetings, and the like, should be arranged in topical files—that is, they should be collected under their own headings: general membership meetings, board meetings, ritual committee, social action committee, anniversary celebrations, etc. This applies as well to congregational publications, which should also have their own files.

Newspaper clippings, pamphlets, and other items of this type should never be pasted in scrapbooks — although donors may often submit material in this form to the archives—but should be kept loose in folders and should be filed either biographically or topically, depending on their subject matter. All newspaper and magazine clippings should be carefully marked as to the name and date of the publication from which they are taken.

In Jewish communities which have only one congregation, but several other Jewish organizations, all newspaper clippings and other "nearprint" material relating to these extra-congregational groups should be preserved in the congregational archives.



## *Supplementary Files*

If there is a constant flow of material relating to the congregation and those associated with it, it might well simplify matters to establish a supplementary file, in which material would be arranged chronologically—year by year—rather than biographically or topically.

Large collections of materials should be microfilmed; the originals may then be returned to their owners.

## *Filing of Minutes*

All minutes should be carefully typewritten in duplicate on good paper (to resist fading) and signed by the secretary and the president. This material may be kept in a loose-leaf, standard corporation, hard-cover, good-paper minute book with prenumbered pages. At the very least, it should be kept in binders and should periodically be bound in book form and filed topically, as indicated above. The value of this material will be greatly enhanced, if an index is prepared for each volume.

Congregational bulletins and yearbooks should be bound annually and separately in book form. All other congregational publications, releases, and mailings should also be bound annually in chronological order in a single volume.

Individuals in possession of historically interesting documents of which they wish to retain the originals should be urged to allow the material to be microfilmed or photostatted for deposit in the congregational archives. An archives is not a museum and need not have *original* copies of documents; microfilmed and/or photostatted material will serve the archives' purpose quite well.

## *Restrictions*

Donors should be permitted to place their contributions to the

archives under restriction, if they wish to do so, particularly where the material deals with living persons or current controversies. Restriction usually means that the material cannot be published—or, in some cases, cannot even be researched—without the permission of the donor or his heirs for a specified number of years.

### *Pictorial Material*

All photographic and other pictorial material relating to the congregation and its members should be preserved. This material, as well as tape recordings, etc., should be carefully marked as to dates, names of the persons and places, and other relevant information. Photographs should never be pasted in a scrapbook, but should be kept loose in folders and housed in a special, alphabetically arranged pictorial file.

Photographic and pictorial material can be best preserved by enclosing each item in a transparent cellophane envelope and housing it, at least initially, in large folders in a filing cabinet and later, as the cabinets become full, in standard archival boxes.

Initially, in most instances, acquisitions can be kept in large folders and housed in filing cabinets. Later on, as the archives' collection grows, it will be practical to transfer older acquisitions to standard archival boxes—assuming, of course, that room is available for storing these boxes; otherwise older acquisitions can be microfilmed.

## V. CONCLUSION

Indifference to the past and indifference to the future go hand in hand. Congregations which undertake to establish and maintain their own archives will serve both the past and the future in exemplary fashion. In this endeavor, the American Jewish Archives stands ready to make the fruits of its own experience

available to all who call on it. Congregations which wish to develop their own archives or reorganize collections of material which they may already possess are invited to apply to the American Jewish Archives for more detailed advice and guidance. The American Jewish Archives is under the direction of Professor Jacob R. Marcus and is located on the campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati 20, Ohio.

## THE FOLLOWING OUTLINE MAY BE HELPFUL:

### WHAT TO COLLECT?

- All congregational records (including minutes)
- Records of groups and organizations affiliated with the congregation
- Congregational publications, bulletins, releases, etc.
- Local Jewish newspapers
- Newspaper and magazine clippings relating to the congregation and its members
- Cemetery records
- Tombstone data
- Memoirs, diaries, personal correspondence, and other papers and documents relating to members of the congregation
- Transcripts of interviews, tape recordings, etc.

### HOW TO FILE ACQUISITIONS?

- Biographical files for individuals and families
- Topical files for congregational minutes, records, and events
- Minutes to be kept in loose-leaf binders
- Congregational publications to be kept in binders
- Restricted material is to be carefully noted
- Pictorial material to be kept in separate alphabetical file



## HOW TO RECORD ACQUISITIONS?

Enter each acquisition in an "accession book"

Record each acquisition on 3" x 5" or 5½" x 8" file cards

Indicate on each card the category under which the item has  
been filed

Keep an alphabetical card file

## WHERE TO HOUSE ARCHIVES?

On the congregation's premises

## HOW TO STORE HOLDINGS?

In fireproof filing cabinets

## WHO IS TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ARCHIVES?

Secretary of the congregation and the Board of Trustees

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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